

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health and

Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands

Witness Statement

**Testimony
Of
Jeffery A. Bryant
Jeff Bryant Forestry, Inc.
Bella Vista, California
On Behalf of
Jeff Bryant and Family
and
The Independent Forest Products Association
To
The House Resources
Forest and Forest Health Subcommittee
and the House Resources
National Parks and Public Lands Subcommittee
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I. Introduction

Good morning Chairman Hansen and Chairman Chenoweth - Hage, and members of the Subcommittees, I am honored to present my testimony today on behalf of myself and my family, as well as the members of the Independent Forest Products Association. My name is Jeff Bryant and I am a Registered Professional Forester in the state of California. My career in resource management began 30 years ago with the U. S. Forest Service. Approximately 5 years ago I retired from the Forest Service and began a new career providing consulting forestry services to clients in Northern California. On October 16, 1999, the value of active forest restoration was brought into clear focus to my family and myself when the Jones Fire burned through our community destroying 174 homes and over 26,000 acres in one day. My educational background combined with my professional and real world experiences give me a unique prospective about the fuels and fire situation in the west and the consequences that inaction will have on our valuable resources and our communities.

First of all I would like to express my deepest sympathy to the people affected by the Los Alamos Fire. I

know first hand the helplessness that a family feels when they are in an emergency evacuation center not knowing if their home and all worldly possessions will be converted to ashes. However, I cannot comprehend the grief that the families who lost their homes must have felt when they first witnessed the devastation. I would also like to offer my sympathy to the dedicated public servants who started the controlled burn for the remorse they must be feeling. We as a nation know that our military leaders must have the best training and oversight available due to the destruction and pain that our military strength can bring on the human race. However, as a nation we feel that it is acceptable to invest two to three weeks of fire behavior training on crew leaders before they enter an explosive forest with a torch. In my opinion, the public employees that physically started the fires are not the responsible parties. The responsible parties are the agency leaders in Washington and the organized environmental machine for creating the illusion that starting fires in areas with unnatural fuels is the politically correct way to manage public lands.

II. The Situation in Northern California

The skies of northern California were dark with smoke from wildfires for over two months last fire season. Approximately 2.3 million acres of both public and private lands were lost to wildfires in the 1999 fire season. I would like to specifically address three of the fires in my testimony because I feel that they illustrate a trend that we are experiencing in northern California. The three fires are: the Megram Fire on the Six Rivers and Shasta - Trinity National Forests; the Lowden Fire that started on lands managed by the BLM and spread to private lands and the Jones Fire that started on the Shasta Trinity National Forests and quickly spread to private lands.

Megram Fire

The Megram Fire burned approximately 125,000 acres in both Humboldt and Trinity Counties of California and was essentially all on public lands. The fire was started, in the Trinity Alps Wilderness, by lightning on August 23, 1999. The August 23, 1999, lightning storms ignited numerous fires in the northern California area thus taxing the fire fighting agencies to the point that no suppression activities were instituted on the Megram fire for at least one week after the fire started. When the fire suppression activities were instigated on the Megram Fire, they consisted of constructing hand lines on main ridges and starting backfires to stop the advancing wildfire.

All went well until September 28, 1999, when a chunk of wood rolled across the fire line and ignited some trees blown down in a windstorm that occurred in 1995. The fire turned into a raging inferno in less than three hours. Within 12 hours the plume from the smoke stretched for 800 miles. Air quality monitoring devices within the adjacent communities of Willow Creek and Hoopa, California, failed because they were not designed to function in such poor air quality. The Megram Fire burned approximately 5,000 acres of heavy untreated blow down in a 24 hour period. The trees were blown down as a result of a windstorm in 1995.

The local Forest Service personnel had recognized the hazard that the wind damaged forest presented shortly after the wind event occurred in 1995 and had proposed treatments to reduce the fire hazard. Unfortunately, only a small area of the wind damage was treated by the Forest Service. Organized environmental groups, the Secretary of Agriculture, and Washington D.C. level agency personnel were very successful at keeping the local Forest Service leadership from implementing salvage and cleanup activities on the ground. As a result, many more acres experienced high intensity burns when the 1999 fire consumed the slash from the 1995 windstorm.

The Watershed Analysis for the Megram Fire completed in March of this year shows that 51 percent of the untreated wind damaged area received intense burns in the 1999 Megram Fire. In the few areas where the Forest Service was allowed to salvage the wind damaged timber and properly treat the slash only 5 percent of the areas received high intensity burns in the 1999 Megram Fire.

If the local Forest Service leadership would have been allowed to implement professional resource restoration after the 1995 windstorm, the intensity and damage resulting from the 1999 Megram Fire would have been significantly less.

Lowden Fire

The Lowden Fire burned approximately 2,000 acres of land in Trinity County, California. It also burned 23 homes within the community of Lewiston, California. The Lowden Fire was ignited on July 2, 1999; by a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) fire crew implementing a prescribed burn. The primary purpose of the prescribed fire in this situation was to control a noxious weed problem on lands administered by the BLM. The errors made by the BLM crew implementing this fire had many similarities with the errors made by the National Park Service in the Los Alamos Fire.

Most of the investigations that I am aware of on the Lewiston Fire focused on the errors that agency personnel made while implementing the burn plan. Very little investigation was conducted on pretreatment options available.

If the BLM had pre-treated the noxious weeds by crushing it with standard farm implements, the fire would probably not have gotten away from the burning crew even with the errors that were made. Pretreatment in grass, brush, or timber can significantly reduce the risk of prescribed fires escaping as a result of accidents or errors by burn crews.

Jones Fire

In one day the Jones Fire burned approximately 26,000 acres in Shasta County, California. There were 954 structures including 174 homes destroyed in the blaze. The Jones Fire started at 4:30 AM on October 16, 1999, on lands administered by the U. S. Forest Service and quickly spread to private lands adjacent to Redding, California. By 9:30 AM the fire had traveled approximately 7 miles and had reached our home, and by the grace of God our home was spared. My neighbor was not as lucky, and by 10:30 AM his home, his livestock, and a life time of irreplaceable valuables were converted to ashes.

My family and I were out of town on the morning of October 16, 1999, when we were contacted by our neighbors. The drive back to Redding was a fast and quiet trip. When we arrived that afternoon, the entire north end of the Sacramento Valley was covered with smoke. We were not allowed to enter the fire area for safety reasons. We know the stress that the families of Los Alamos went through when they were waiting for word on their community.

While the cause of the Jones Fire is yet to be determined, it started in a National Forest Recreation Area, adjacent to Shasta Lake, so it was most likely caused by a human. The rate at which the fire spread can be attributed to high winds, low humidity, and dense brush and timber vegetation. Forest Service fire crews

could not reach the fire on National Forest due to lack of road access and unpredictable fire behavior.

Management within the Shasta Lake National Recreation Area (NRA) provides a stable base of employment for the greater Redding area, as well as a place for the local residents to enjoy water related sports. The NRA also provides a very real fire hazard to the Redding area. Historic fire suppression and high fuel buildup coupled with very high recreation use during the dry summer and fall months make the south side of the NRA an incubator for wildfires. These wildfires are positioned to threaten thousands of homes.

As a result of the wildfires in northern California, my homeowners insurance rate increased over twenty-five percent between 1999 and 2000. The primary reason for the rate adjustment is the increase in wildfire claims that my insurance company is experiencing. This type of increase translates into the hundreds of thousands of dollars annually for the homeowners in the Jones Fire area. Which in turn translates into the millions of dollars annually for the homeowners within Shasta County and into the billions of dollars annually for homeowners in the inter mountain west.

In the recent past, living adjacent to public lands generally increased the value of ones property. Today, due to the restrictions placed on professional stewardship by organized environmental groups and politically correct forestry oversight by Washington level bureaucrats, living adjacent to public lands is a liability.

If the wind has shifted just a few degrees to the Southwest, the Jones fire would have consumed much of Redding, CA rather than my small town of Bella Vista.

III. Restoring the Forest of Northern California

While wildfires are a part of the natural ecosystem, reintroduction of fire after a 50 to 100 year absence without pre-treatment will spell disaster to the natural and social ecosystems of the west. Current central control of public lands by the organized environmental machine and Washington level bureaucrats has not allowed the pre-treatment to take place at a rate that will allow reintroduction of fire consistent with restoration needs. In short we, if fire is going to become part of the ecosystem in the 21st century, we are going to have to learn how to pre-treat substantially more acres than we currently do. Pre-treatment for restoration needs does not only mean cutting trees to space them out. It includes crushing grass prior to burning. It means crushing and masticating brush species prior to the reintroduction of fire. It means constructing and maintaining a watershed friendly road system that will allow pre-treatment to progress at a rate consistent with restoration needs. I want to stress that you cannot reintroduce fire without pre-treatment and you cannot pre-treat without an adequate road system. I view the current proposals on the Forest Service Transportation plan and the Roadless EIS as fundamentally flawed because in combination they will eliminate needed transportation corridors for pre-treatment access

Restoring the resilience of our public lands through restoration is of paramount importance for the benefit of future generations as well as the safety and economic health of our current generation. The temporal importance of the restoration activities cannot be over emphasized. For a number of reasons, we have failed to protect the resilience of our public lands for the past 50 to 100 years. Our public lands cannot afford the process constrained ?top-down? approach that has currently got our restoration activities in gridlock. Our public lands also cannot afford the incremental uncoordinated single policy approach that prevents restoration activities from being implemented. A single policy on prescribed burning superimposed on the Endangered Species Act, Clean Water Act, Antiquities Act, Land and Resource Management Act, National Forest Management Act, and all other applicable acts, will only slow the current broken process. Restoration management needs one coordinated comprehensive statutory policy that includes the direction of the

environmental regulations and places discretionary authority at the management unit closest to the ground. When your committees are addressing this situation, I urge you to focus on the need, focus on the urgency, focus on professionals on the ground. We need a long-range plan that allows professional resource managers to implement restoration activities with the concurrence of the general public.

Less than a month ago the Forest Service released a prescribed burning plan that was long on fire and short on pre-treatment. That plan called for Congress to fund approximately \$820 million per year for the next 15 years to deal with the 52 million acres of National Forest lands that are at high risk to wildfire. Within 72 hours of its release the Office of Management and Budget scratched that plan as too expensive and directed the Forest Service to develop a "more realistic" plan that cost approximately \$65 million per year.

Last year the Forest Service spent over \$110 million in suppression on the Megram Fire alone. The BLM spent approximately \$2.5 million to fight their uncontrolled prescribed burn, which destroyed twenty-three homes. The BLM estimates that they will have to pay between \$20 and \$30 million in damages to homeowners before they are all done.

Already, this year we've experienced at least two prescribed burns run-amuck. In both cases there was no pre-treatment of existing fuels. The Cerro Grande Fire has cost you and I in excess of \$16.8 million in fire suppression costs through May 31st and some are saying up to \$1 billion in claims for all the homes destroyed by the uncontrolled prescribed burn, and the cost of rebuilding parts of the Los Alamos Research facility. The Outlet Fire set by the Park Service on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon National Park has exceeded \$5.9 million in fire suppression costs.

A rational person would look at these events and their cost and wonder why Congress has allowed them selves to become part of the annual fire season fleecing of tax-payers. Restoration and reintroduction of fire into the ecosystem will reduce the intensity and severity of wildfires and significantly reduce the cost of fire suppression. Restoration activities not only create stable employment in rural communities, they generate income when conducted in timber stands. This income can be used to offset the cost of pre-treatment activities in grass and brush areas. Restoration and reintroduction of fire into public lands is not expensive, it is just incompatible with the direction of high-level Washington D.C. agency bureaucrats and the organized environmental machine. Congress needs to incorporate fiscal incentives into the budgetary process that will reward reintroduction of fire into the ecosystem only after restoration pre-treatment. Congress also needs to develop direction for land management agencies that eliminates the regulatory gridlock from pre-treatment and restoration activities.

I feel that there is a very high probability that Congress, the Administration, and the public will be dealing with similar events next year. As a result of our inactions, another billion dollars of taxpayer's money will be used to pay for suppressing wildfires. As a taxpayer, I am wondering when Congress will grab the bull by the horns and deal with this. I am wondering when I am going to get a credit on my federal income taxes to compensate me for the extra cost I will incur on my homeowners insurance for costs which the federal land managers and Congress have forced on me because they cannot develop a rational federal land management policy. Quite frankly, Chairman Hansen and Chairman Chenoweth-Hage I think this Congress and this Administration have failed my family and the federal forests, as well as the on-the-ground federal land managers who are trying to get things done in a safe and sane manner. When you do decide to act, hopefully before too many more families are devastated, I hope you will focus on the highest leadership of these agencies and this Administration, not the poor soldiers out in the field doing their best against overwhelming odds.

V. Conclusion

I have been honored to testify to this Committee and I want to personally thank you for holding this hearing. And I trust that you will act now, before others in rural communities have to suffer like the poor folks of Los Alamos. I request that my full written statement, as well as my oral statement, be included in the record of this hearing.

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